



Supporting the most vulnerable children and young people

A guide to supporting vulnerable pupils and students during periods of disruption



Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

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A lot of people are feeling anxious and worried at the moment. That's not surprising given the impact the coronavirus pandemic is having on our lives. Children who are vulnerable are likely to find the changes to their lives difficult to manage. This booklet shares some of the insights we have gathered from research and practice including our own.

Modelling calm

Children and young people read anxiety easily, so it is important for us to put aside our own very real worries and to stay calm when talking to children and young people so that they don't pick up on them. This isn't always easy. Staff are having to leave families or vulnerable people at home in order to support vulnerable children and young people to stay in school or to support those whose parents are keyworkers. Staff, too, have their own worries.

However, vulnerable children and young people need to feel safe and secure at school. Many of our most vulnerable pupils will have had times when they have felt at risk. These experiences can be triggered when they feel vulnerable or, in their eyes, under threat. We need to bear this in mind and develop support strategies for them and learn to look after ourselves so that we can remain calm even in the most trying of circumstances.

The importance of a safe environment

The closure of schools means that some pupils will have lost some of the safest places they have known, and they may be deeply worried about losing access to adults in school who support them. We also need to recognise that although some vulnerable pupils are attending school, their school environment has changed; many of their friends may be at home, the days may be structured differently, teachers and other staff they turn to may be absent. All this amounts to significant disruption to them and they may find the change in routine difficult to navigate. Sometimes simple things can help. For example, small, containable environments can help provide a calm environment.



Three practical steps

All schools and colleges are different and have a great deal of experience in tailoring information to meet the needs of their pupils. Nevertheless, sometimes it's helpful to have some overarching principles, and in line with government guidelines, we have identified three practical steps schools can take to safeguard and support those most at risk in their setting. These steps draw on advice from colleagues from the Pears Family School, an alternative provision founded by the Anna Freud Centre who are currently successfully implementing strategies in their own school to cope with the current crisis.

1. Risk assess individual pupils

With schools temporarily closed, risk factors will be higher, especially for pupils who do not meet the threshold for external support from agencies such as children's social care. It's still possible to make referrals during this time for those pupils who are deemed to be at risk of immediate harm. In such cases your local authority will be able to direct you to the most appropriate pathway via their website.

What you categorise as risk is up to your setting. All schools have their own high, medium and low risk levels. Assign levels of risk that work for your school so you can more easily identify, assess and mitigate risk. Risk settings are not pre-defined categories and should meet your pupils' needs. Now that many children are doing schoolwork from home you might want to consider how you are [managing the transition to home learning](#) and addressing the additional issues that distance learning raises for children with SEND.

Schools then need to identify what they are offering children at each of the levels of risk identified. This will include how children and young people are being monitored, supported and what interventions they are being offered.

The Pears Family School has put together a [model of monitoring and communication](#). The school is operating what it describes as an 'enhanced model' where pupils are looked after and educated at home and at school. They work from home or school depending on their level of need which is carefully assessed. Children with a high level of need may need to come into school and work in an environment that they recognise and most suits their assessed needs. The document we have linked to was designed to help staff with this new way of working which balances providing education between home and school, and which provides staff with guidelines about how to support them.



2. Focus on nurture

It's important that we talk to children about coronavirus. They will have heard about it at home, on the news, from their friends and in school. Some may be feeling very scared. Some children and young people will be talking to their parents and carers about the current situation, others will not have this opportunity, but all children should have the option to talk to a safe and trusted adult in the school setting. It's important to find out what they know or have heard already and what questions they have. Listen to the child or young person and answer their questions. Remember to stay calm when talking to children and young people and not to show your own worry. The British Psychological Society has published some helpful [guidelines](#) around talking about coronavirus with children and young people and illness in general, taking into account their developmental age and understanding.

When speaking to pupils during this time it is important that they feel you are listening to their concerns and answering their questions. Let them know that in a situation like this it is normal to feel sad, worried, confused, scared or angry. Remind them of their support networks, at school or at home, or peer relationships that they can turn to for comfort or advice in this time. Alternatively, some students may not wish to reach out to others. If this is the case, support can still be offered through the promotion of [self-care strategies](#) for older and [younger](#) children which will equip students with the skills to manage their own wellbeing.

Provide structure

All children need boundaries, and often many of our most vulnerable pupils either won't have had boundaries or will have had inconsistent and inappropriate boundaries in different phases of childhood. Consistent boundaries can help a child to feel safe, but a nurturing environment is also necessary for a child to flourish. In a crisis routine is often lost, and structure and boundaries help children and young people feel safe and understand what is likely to happen next, all of which helps engender a sense of calm.

Adapting to this new method of teaching and learning may take longer for some students, for instance children with autism spectrum conditions may well find it difficult to accept that 'school' work should be done at home. The National Autistic Society provides some useful [home working tips for families](#). Similarly, some students may be experiencing higher levels of anxiety and may be struggling with productivity and concentration. The priority should be to establish a routine that works for the pupil, their parent and carer, and the school. This may look very different to classroom practice. All students, but often the most vulnerable, find comfort in routine as it removes the worry of the unknown.

Teachers will need to schedule in regular check ins with their pupils. This will allow them to log and monitor their wellbeing and mental health, noting any changes that may impact their risk status. Safeguarding processes apply as always, and should be observed with particular vigilance when schools are closed.

Pupils should have access to open dialogue in small groups. It's important that pupils have a safe space to express any worries they have. If students are feeling higher levels of anxiety or are struggling to adapt to the new environment, they may struggle to communicate effectively. Using [social stories](#), [sentence starters](#) or [visual imagery](#) (such as happy, angry or sad faces) as prompts can help engage students who may be struggling at this time.

Conducting regular surveys with staff, students, parents and carers throughout this period of distance learning will enable school leaders to react swiftly to concerning themes that are emerging and ensure the right level of support is in place for each student.



3. Upskill staff

Teachers often have excellent pastoral skills and use their time in the classroom to form positive and sustainable relationships. However, whilst they are adapting to this new classroom environment, whether that is teaching small groups in school or delivering lessons online, they may need some additional guidance in how to effectively communicate with and support students. Delivering short online training sessions with departments should help alleviate these concerns and equip staff with the tools to deliver effective pastoral care during this vital time.

Some other issues that may be worth exploring to help upskill staff include:

- How to monitor pupils' wellbeing virtually
- How to communicate effectively online
- Identifying triggers and signs of anxiety
- Supporting and alleviating student stress

Similarly sharing expertise across your staff teams can be incredibly helpful. Teaching assistants with experience of supporting children and young people, particularly with one-to-one working experience, may be able to share vital knowledge of individual students, as well as generic strategies for effective practice.

More about Schools in Mind

Schools in Mind is a free network for staff working in schools and colleges and allied professionals which shares practical, academic and clinical expertise regarding the wellbeing and mental health issues that affect schools. For more details and to join Schools in Mind, please visit:

www.annafreud.org/schoolsinmind

Resources about supporting vulnerable children and young people during this time

[Self-care approaches \(for older and younger children\): Anna Freud Centre](#)

[Self-care tips: Childline](#)

[The coronavirus toolkit from Anna Freud Centre's Mentally Healthy Schools site \(for primary schools\)](#)

[A practical guide to running an Alternative Provision setting: The Pears Family School](#)

[Talking to children about coronavirus: Elsa Support](#)

[Easy read guide for children with SEND: AMAZE](#)

[Top tips to support autistic children and adults: the National Autistic Society](#)

[Advice on coping with an eating disorder: YoungMinds](#)

[Tips for coping with OCD: YoungMinds](#)

[Top tips for coping with OCD: The Children's Society](#)

[Wellbeing activity ideas for schools: Place2Be](#)

[COVID19 – How LGBT groups can help: Stonewall](#)

[Managing the transition to home schooling for children with SEND: Institute of Education, UCL](#)

[Social story – pandemics and the coronavirus: Carol Gray](#)



Finding support:

Samaritans: 116 123 / www.samaritans.org
Childline: 0800 1111 / www.childline.org.uk
Youth Wellbeing Directory: www.youthwellbeing.co.uk

Details on how to find urgent help are available here (annafreud.org/urgenthelp).

About the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families:

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families has developed and delivered pioneering mental health care for over 60 years.

Our aim is to transform current mental health provision in the UK by improving the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of treatment.

We believe that every child and their family should be at the heart of the care they receive, working in partnership with professionals.

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